

## **For the Living of these Days: 4. Campaigns, Promises and the King**

**Luke 1:26-33, 38**

**December 21, 2008**

**Pastor Steve Richards**

For these four Sundays in the Advent, we have considered some of the major stories making news in the past year and then asking what Christmas means for the living of these days. There has been one news story dominating the entire year – to the point where we hardly wanted to turn on the television for fear we would hear one more political commercial. The key word in every candidate's campaign was change and here's what it sounded like to me: "Put your trust in me as the candidate of change and I'll take care of you. I won't ask anything of you but I'll give you everything." But what I want is a public servant who will do what's right even if it costs them votes or campaign contributions. That would be a candidate whose promises we could take seriously. What does this have to do with Christmas?

Let me test your memory with a few Christmas carols. I will sing a line and then I'd like you to sing the next line.

Hark the herald angels sing...(glory to the newborn king).

Come and behold him...(born the king of Israel)

Come and worship, come and worship...(worship Christ the newborn king)

Noel, noel, noel, noel...(born is the king of Israel)

What word do all four of the lines that you sang have in common? (king) That's what I want us to consider this morning – how Jesus is the king, the candidate to rule in our lives. What does Christmas mean for the living of these days?

This morning's scripture is called the annunciation – the announcement that this young woman, perhaps 14 years old, would be with child. She was being told that she was pregnant with not just any child but the Messiah, the one promised to her people, the one her people had been waiting to arrive for a thousand years. And here's the promise: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." This was the Messiah!

Where did this promise of a Messiah originate? A thousand years before Jesus there was a man named Saul. The people had pleaded with God for a king, and finally God gave them Saul. At first, Saul seemed to be the right person to be king, but then he did what was evil in God's sight. Midway through his reign, he wandered from his faith and his responsibilities as king. So God spoke to the prophet Samuel and said: "I have chosen another king to serve in Saul's place. I want you to take the oil and go to the little town of Bethlehem in Judea and look for a shepherd named Jesse, and you will anoint one of his sons to be the next king over my people Israel." How was a king chosen? On behalf of God, the priest or prophet would take oil and pour it on their head – much like we take oil and anoint a person at baptism or anoint those who are sick. The oil was a sign that God had chosen the king. Hebrew word for "anointed one" is *misheok* or Messiah. The Greek word is *christos* or Christ. Jesus' last name is not Christ. Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God, set aside to be king.

Samuel finds Jesse and asks to see his sons. Jesse brings his oldest son. He is strong and good looking. If ever there was someone who looked like a king, it was Eliab, and Samuel was ready to anoint him king. But God speaks to Samuel and says, "what are you doing? Did I tell you this is the one? Don't you remember I don't look at outward appearances but the heart. Eliab is not the one." So Jesse bring in his next son, Abinadab, and this one looks like king material and Samuel says, "Lord, I see what you mean, this is the one." But the Lord says,

“Samuel, you’re not listening. I don’t judge on outward appearances but the heart and Abinadab is not the one. Jesse brought seven sons before Samuel, but none of them is the one God has chosen. So Samuel asks Jesse, “Don’t you have any more sons?” And Jesse replies, “Yes, I have one more. He’s the youngest. He’s just a kid. You don’t want him. He’s a dreamer, and he’s out in the pasture looking after the sheep.” But Samuel insists and the youngest, David, is called and the moment David enters the room God says to Samuel, “This is the one. This is the king, a man after my own heart.” Samuel anoints David.

David would become the greatest king Israel has ever known. David’s insignia, the star is even found on the flag of present day Israel. David defined what it meant to be king. He wasn’t perfect. Toward the end of his life David did some despicable things that were displeasing to God, but through it all David maintained a relationship with God. He was a man after God’s own heart. Toward the end of his life, the prophet Nathan comes to David and says, “God promises that your descendants will rule on your throne forever and rule over the house of Israel forever.” That’s quite a promise.

For 400 years the Davidic line continued to rule as king – until 586 BC – when an event happened that we learned about two weeks ago. The Babylonian empire entered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. They bound the Davidic king, Zedekiah, killed his sons, gouged out his eyes and carried him into Exile and that was the end of the line. There was no more king. This was devastating. But what about God’s promise? It was all they had – a promise – and it was the promise that sustained them – that one day God’s promise would be fulfilled. Five times in the book of Isaiah the promise is lifted up. In chapter 9:6-7

*For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the increase of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the LORD Almighty  
will accomplish this.*

The prophet Jeremiah had escaped to Egypt and sent a message of hope. Jeremiah 23:5 – “*The days are coming,*” declares the Lord, “*when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch...*” Branch means descendant. The Hebrew word for branch is *natzor*. Remember the town where Jesus grew up? Long before Jesus was born, a town was named *Natzareth* (Nazareth) out of the hope that a branch would come forth and hundreds of years what happened?

The people hoped for a king, a Messiah who would deliver them and restore prominence to Israel. When they returned from Exile, there were kings but none of them served with honor and integrity and the people knew they were not the messiah. They continued to hope. Just before the birth of Jesus, the hope was fervent. The Romans now occupied Israel and had set up a king named Herod. Herod called himself the messiah. He was Herod the Great – but he was not from the line of David which was why Herod was terrified when the wise men came and asked,

“where is he who is born king of the Jews?” Herod was not born king. The Romans made him king, and so he commanded that the infants be killed. He was so afraid that he would lose power and control that he killed one of his wives, his mother-in-law, and three of his sons. The people knew he was not the Messiah. The people continued to hope.

Jesus was a most unlikely king. He was born in Bethlehem, a descendant of David. But look at his qualifications: poor, his father a carpenter, grew up in Nazareth, a town with the kind of reputation where people said “nothing good comes from Nazareth”. Last summer when we were in London, we toured the Tower of London and saw the crown jewels. We waited in line, passed through security, and the jewels were beautiful. But what did Jesus’ crown jewels look like? (crown of thorns) What kind of king was that? He hung around with the wrong kind of people. Is he the sort of candidate that you would follow? Think about who he chose to follow him: fishermen who were uneducated men; zealots who were extremists; a tax collector whom everyone knew could not be trusted. Remember how he reached out to a Samaritan, she was a foreigner who had lived with one man after another. Or the time when the powerbrokers of his day brought before him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They were ready with stones to kill her as the Law commanded. To test him, they ask Jesus what to do. And Jesus looks at the crowd and says, “Whichever of you has never sinned, you be the one to throw the first stone.” And one by one they dropped their stones and walked away. And Jesus takes the woman by the hand, lifts her up and says, “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.” Or the time Jesus was in the Pharisee’s house, surrounded by very influential people when a woman comes to the door. Everyone recognized her. She was often standing on the street corner or back alley waiting for customers. When she enters the room, there is a gasp – “what is she doing here” and she falls at Jesus feet, anoints his feet with her tears. Who would follow a king like that? People would crucify a king like that!

In the recent campaign season we were encouraged to vote for the candidate most like us, but I don’t want a leader like me. I’m hoping for one who is better than me – one who will reach out to me, understand me, stay with me, love me. One Sunday evening this month, I saw an episode of Extreme Makeover. It the program where a family is selected and given a new home and everything to go with it. And in this episode, a family from Albert Lea had been selected. The Dad had been a farmer but had quit farming when he lost his arm in a farming accident. He now drove a school bus for the small Christian school where his children attended. The Mom had a congenital heart defect that could not be fixed. And their home was a mess. Here was a family that was doing the best they could with what they had and helping others but still they were struggling. And the host of program asks the Mom, “what’s the one thing you need more than anything else?” And she said, “Hope.” And he said, “we’ll do something about that.” And they gave her a new house, which I’m sure helped – but no matter how beautiful the house, it will never be the fulfillment of hope. For that, she needs the Messiah.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, we light the final candle and remember LOVE – the love that God brought to the world in Jesus. It’s not a warm, syrupy kind of love, but a love that said – I want to bless you. I want the best in your life. I see who you are and how you do what you do and how you get hurt and who you end up hurting – and still, I love you and seek God’s best for you. And whatever it costs, I will pay it for you. I love you.

Last week someone shared with me what a child said. He was asked, “what is love?” And the child, five years old, replied: “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.” This week my hope for you is that you will stop long enough to look and listen for love coming down at Christmas.

## Study Guide

### Monday Read Psalm 89

We begin the week by reading a psalm that helps us understand the Old Testament longing for a Messiah who would save the people. They were looking for a king. God made a covenant with David around 980 B.C., that there would be a king from the house of David that would reign forever. This psalm was written 400 years later—after the Davidic king, Zedekiah, was forced by the Babylonians to watch as his sons were murdered, and then his eyes were gouged out (2 Kings 25:7). This was a dark time for the Jewish people. They were carried away as slaves, their temple destroyed, their king subjected to humiliation and torture, the Jewish people wondered whether God remembered his promises to David and how he could possibly fulfill them.

- The first 37 verses are a reminder of the covenant and an affirmation of faith, but with verse 38 the tone changes. It is filled with questions for God. The psalmist wouldn't see the questions answered in his lifetime; yet, notice the final affirmation of faith in the last line. What was the writer feeling?
- Have you experienced a time when you felt God had abandoned you? Nothing was going according to your plan—one disappointment after another. But in remembering all the ways you felt God was not present, you could see the hand of God. Let verse 52 be your prayer for today.

### Tuesday Read Luke 1:26-56

Today we turn to the Christmas Story itself. You may want to share these readings with your family or friends on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Remember that Zechariah and Elizabeth were an elderly couple who had never had children, but now they too were pregnant. Elizabeth's son would be John the Baptist.

- What did you learn about Jesus and about Mary from this passage? What did you learn about God's ways and the character of God from this passage?

### Wednesday Read Matthew 1:1-25

Today we turn to Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. We begin by reading Jesus' genealogy. Here Matthew traces back Jesus' lineage through Joseph to demonstrate that Jesus was descended from David, but more than that, to highlight some interesting features of his family tree. Note in verse 3 the mention of Tamar; she was thought at one time to be cursed by her family. In verse 5 we read of Rahab, who was a prostitute and a foreigner. We also read in that verse of Ruth, who was a Moabitess—another foreigner from one of Israel's archenemies. In verse 6 we read of the wife of Uriah—this was Bathsheba, whom David forced into adultery and whose husband David had placed in a position of certain death at the front of the battle lines. All of these tales and details are a part of Jesus' lineage. But the most scandalous detail of Jesus' birth was, for those who would not have known or believed the story of the virgin birth, the fact that he was conceived out of wedlock and Joseph was not the father.

- What do you learn about Jesus in this story? About Mary? About Joseph? What do you learn about the character and ways of God from this passage?

- Join us for one of our Christmas Eve services tonight. At 4 and 5 p.m., we will celebrate Christmas with the children leading most of the service. At 7, 9 and 10:30 p.m., we will celebrate with candlelight and carols. Our 7 p.m. worship is contemporary and 9 and 10:30 p.m. are traditional.

**Thursday Read Luke 2:1-20**

Merry Christmas! Enjoy reading the Christmas story with your family or friends. What does this story teach you about Jesus? About God's ways and character?

We rejoice that God came into the world in Jesus of Nazareth—born of Mary, growing through childhood into an adult ministry, helping us to see the hope, peace, joy, and love of God; his voice undimmed by the centuries, his call and his promise as clear to us as it was to his disciples so long ago.

- Come to us, Lord Jesus,
- Be born in us this day, in our hearts, our minds, our lives.
- May the light of your life be kindled in us,
- And lead us to the shining truth,
- of God with us, God for us, God in us. Amen.

**Friday Read Matthew 2:1-18**

Sometime after Christmas morning, but while the holy family was still in Bethlehem, the wise men (also referred to as Magi or kings) came to pay homage to him. Remember that gold was the gift for kings, incense the tool of priests and myrrh was used for embalming the dead—these gifts pointed toward Jesus as the king of kings, the priest who would intercede with God on our behalf, and the myrrh pointed to the fact that this baby would one day give his life for his people. The story of the flight to Egypt tells us that Jesus and his family at one point were refugees, not unlike some who come to this country fleeing persecution or oppression in other parts of the world.

**Saturday Read John 1:1-9**

Finally on this Christmas week you are invited to read the Christmas story as told by John—a story we read on Christmas Eve night.

- What do you learn about Jesus here? What does John mean calling Jesus “the Word?” In what sense is Jesus God's direct word to humanity?